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Voices from Nursery – A Crack of Intervention to Child Abuse and Neglect in Japan

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Abstract

Purpose : This article aims to describe the status quo of abused and neglected children in nursery school, and to analyze the factors affecting the conditions of those abused and neglected children.

Method : Intensive interview to the directors of 9 nursery schools were conducted and data of 32 cases were collected.

Results : 5 modified case episodes edited from collected data were presented to show the typical conditions of abused and neglected children in nursery schools. Some common characteristics of those cases were discussed.

1. Purpose

This article has 2 purposes. First, the author purports to describe the status quo of child abuse and neglect and its prevention and/or intervention in nursery schools, and positions of nursery schools for the prevention. Second, the author try to analyzes the factors affecting the conditions of the child abuse and neglect cases in nursery schools to find how to better serve children in danger.

2. Background

2.1. Nursery School

Before reporting and analysis, definition of the word 'nursery school' has to be given. Here the 'nursery school' (or 'nursery') is referred as the institution in which day care of children are

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provided. More precisely, there are 2 kinds of day care provider in Japan: 'nursery school' & 'preschool'. The difference between those two are as follows.

The nursery school service is longer, usually from 9 am to 3:30 pm, at longest from 7:30 am to 7:30 pm. And it is basically available by placement through authority welfare agency, such as the child welfare section at the city/town/village/ward office. The national ministry in charge is Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

In contrast, preschool is regarded as much more educational. Its service is shorter, usually from 10 am to 2 pm, and there's no placement for preschool. The national ministry in charge is Ministry of Education and Science.

In short, nursery school is the institute for child welfare while preschool is the institute for toddler education. So there are quite a few opportunities for nursery school to take care of children involved in abusive and neglectful circumstances.

2.2. Provision of Services in Nagoya City

Nagoya city has 269 nursery schools (125 municipal and 144 private), serving 26,188 children (9,530 in municipal and 16,658 in private). Population of Japan is about 127.6 million in 2003, and that of Nagoya is about 2.2 million in 2000. Population under 15 years old of Japan is around 17.9 million (14.0% of whole population), and that of Nagoya is about 303 thousand (14.0% of whole population in Nagoya). Population of birth a year in Nagoya is about 19.8 thousand. As nursery schools usually serves to children 0 to 5 years old, 26 thousand children who are be provided with the services in nursery schools are about 20 % of estimated 120 thousand children of the same ages in Nagoya city.

3. Method

An interview survey was conducted from Dec. 2004 to Jan. 2005, in which 9 municipal nursery school directors were interviewed, and the information on 32 cases were collected. Interviews were retrospective, therefore not all the cases were ongoing at the time of the interview, and the time of occurrence varied from case to case. However, the cases could be regarded typical enough to provide one aspect of child abuse and neglect in Japan. And, based on the result of this research, the questionnaire researches, has been conducted as the next step for 3 years so far.

4. Result

4.1. Overall conditions

Among the 32 cases collected, there found 17 neglect, 2 neglect plus other type, 5 physical, 6 physical plus other type, and 2 other type (one emotional and one DV) of abuse cases. And in general, there seemed to be many 'grey zone' cases that were not easy to determine the separation of children from home. Perpetrators included in these cases were only mothers and fathers.

Compared with the data by Nagoya city government nursery section, we could find some differences. Nagoya City data in 2004 indicated that there were 98 cases and 12 suspicious situations in 124 municipal nursery schools. These 98 cases consist of 40 physical, 48 neglect, 8 emotional and 2 multiple abuse. There found no sexual abuse cases in the city survey. Compared with about 9.5 thousand children placed in municipal nursery schools, 1 in 100 nursery school children are abused, which is, we would say, very high. I would very roughly estimate that 1 in 800, that is 26.6 thousand in about 21.4 million, children are abused in general.

General characteristics of cases found are as follows.

Major risk factors in these families are, mental illness, poverty, difficulties for daily life chores, addictions, and harsh discipline.

Common ways of support by nursery schools are activities such as fulfilling children's daily needs, acceptance of children, and acceptance of parents.

And common collaborations for the support are, visitation by public health nurses, visitation by social workers of child guidance centers (CGC), Short-Term Separation, and provision of Home Help (Helpers for Household Chores).

4.2. Typical situations

To take a closer look to these characteristics above, 5 modified case examples are presented here for illustrating the situations, and giving some details of the ways of supports.

[Case 1]

First example is the case with mental disorder. Type of abuse is physical abuse.

In this case, mother has depression, panic disorder and a history of overdose. When she gets angry she hits the child, then she reports to the agency for herself, seemingly as SOS sign. Later she regrets and buys something for the child.

As the response to this case, nursery director held meetings with mother together with CGC. In the meeting the CGC staff talked very highly of the director as a reliable person who deeply concerned about the child and mother. It seemed to have good impact to mother and she became open to the nursery director and began to disclose her own career as an abused. Accordingly the kid became stable.

[Case 2]

The second example is another case with mental disorder. Type of abuse is neglect.

In this family, mother is the only parent, but she cannot work because of depression and personality disorder. So mother earns their life on welfare money. And she lacks household chore ability, which makes the house messy. There seems to be no physical abuse, and child is kind and vivid.

In response to this case, related agencies keep watching the family, providing short-term separation when necessary. As mother likes the nursery director, she is often asked to accompany visitation by other agencies as a key person. Home help visitations are sometimes provided. Nursery school director and staffs sometimes deliver foods and/or keep lunch till later hours for the child. In fact, provision of both home help visit and food is out of rule.

[Case 3]

Third example is a case with addiction. Type of abuse is neglect.

In this case, mother has pachinko addiction. She is very often late for the pick-up time in the evening. Mother divorced father and now lives with her parents, but she doesn't get along well with her mother.

In this case, the response doesn't seem well-functioning. Evening staff often took the child to her own house to take care. But there seems to be distrust to mother among staffs. As the result, case is stuck.

[Case 4]

4th example is a case with poverty. Type of abuse is neglect, and physical abuse is found as well.

In this case, parents neglect children, so elder child takes care of younger.

Father batters children. He goes to psychiatrist, holding emotional instability and troubles with neighbors.

Parents got 'paper divorce', in which they submit the divorce notification, seemingly to get welfare money.

To respond to this case, nursery school, CGC, health care center, and welfare visitor discussed collaboration with children's grandmother in a case conference, but could not conclude any particular measure. CGC and welfare section of ward office, which is in charge of providing welfare money, argues on divorce and welfare money. Welfare section wants to stop providing welfare money as they confirm the cohabitation of divorced couple, which is out of rule. But CGC likes to keep providing it to ensure children's safer environment.

[Case 5]

5th example is the case with harsh discipline. Types of abuse are physical abuse and neglect.

In this family, mother began living with new boyfriend after her divorce. Boyfriend punishes the child in a cruel way such as 'airplane', in which he falls the child to the floor from above. He thinks it is a discipline to let child learn others' pain.

Mother knows his cruelty but does not stop it. Mother is also cold to child.

To respond to this case, separation has been considered quite a few time but not implemented, mainly because child loves mother. Nursery school director talks to parents and in some occasion she persuades them to let a CGC worker join, as 'knowledgeable man on child rearing whom you can consult to', to their meeting. Director's acceptance such as encouraging good part of parenting gets parents open to her, for example boyfriend began to talk about his own biological child now living separately.

4.3. Supports by Nurseries

There are many supports by nurseries for the children in difficult conditions.

The supports may be sorted out into 3 categories, which are, fulfilling children's daily and developmental needs, psychological care for children, and care for parents.

The first category includes provision of lunch, breakfast, bath and/or shower, laundry, and toilet training. These are sometimes supports that breaks regulations, not to mention usually expected services. For example, nurseries give children lunch even they come as late as one o'clock in the afternoon, 2 hours later than usual lunch time, while the regulation prohibit to keep food more than 2 hours.

The second category, psychological care for children, includes acceptance to attachment needs, limit setting to violent behaviors shared by all staffs, and encouraging children to express their feelings and emotions. These are within the range of expected services, but, according to the nature of children in trouble, nurseries have to cover wide and deep desire of children.

The third category, care for parents, includes listening and empathy to parents, often by key-persons, and showing parents children's change. Discussion and confrontation can be provided, depending on parents attitude and, more significantly, skills of nursery staffs.

5. Discussion

So what can and cannot we do for child protection in nursery schools under current conditions in Japan?

We can do some daily care supports children's survival. Then there's potential improvement of situation as children grow up. We can also do, in some cases, collaboration with other agencies. They are sometimes effective. What we need is further examination on ways of collaboration. Then what we cannot do in, or around, nursery schools?

First and worst of all, we lack treatment order. So there's no guarantee of improvement even in case of temporary separation. We can rarely separate children and parents because of the lack of shelters and foster homes. We should say that "neglect is being neglected". That's why nursery schools hold so many neglect cases. And we can only do indirect intervention to parents. Therefore, impact to parents is limited. However, nursery school is often the only agency that can talk to parents.

In short, the nurseries are expected to take role, at least partly, of the residential care, treatment care, family maintenance worker and home visitor. Why so? There are some contributing factors.

First, there is the stress on the detection and intervention (Kobayashi & Matsumoto, 2005) .

With rather short history of prevention of child abuse and neglect, focuses are on detection, report, and intervention such as separation. Treatment for both children and parents are far behind.

Second, there is the lack of resources for treatment and recovery. In case of non-separation, something have to be done in order to improve children's conditions. That's why we provide services to improve parents' skill and to change parents' attitude, which many countries critically lack in Japan. With rapid increase of detected abuse cases, shelters and residential homes are full, staffs' training to take care of abused children is not enough, and the CGC workers are forced to work so hard that they get nearly burning-out. They have to work as both investigation and family-maintenance worker, which may cause great trouble to children (Ishikawa 2000) .

Good news is that we begin providing home visiting in Japan, but we are not sure the effectiveness as we lack systematic evaluations. So, we still have very long way to go.

6. Concluding remarks

Nursery schools keep holding difficult cases that cannot be easily solved. Nursery schools also play important role in watching cases, children's care and communication with parents, which may lead to improvement of cases. And nursery schools have the same difficulty as CGC to change parents' behavior maybe due to lack of treatment order.

As collaboration among agencies sometimes works, further examination is required. Further effort for 'system improvement' is eagerly required.

References

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